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ON THE STANDARDIZATION OF
GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES
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Item 4 of the provisional agenda*

REPORTS BY DIVISIONS AND GOVERNMENTS ON THE SITUATION IN THEIR REGIONS AND COUNTRIES AND ON THE PROGRESS MADE IN THE STANDARDIZATION OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES SINCE THE SIXTH CONFERENCE

Report of the United States/Canada Division 1992-1997

Paper submitted by the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographical Names, United States/Canada Division**

* E/CONF.91/1.

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Since the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in 1992, representatives of the United States / Canada Division have met twice a year at geographical names meetings of either country: United States Board on Geographic Names and the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names. Also they have met more informally at the annual meetings of the professional societies: American Name Society and the Canadian Society for the Study of Names.

Several areas of Divisional cooperation since 1992 may be mentioned.

- In 1988, a Document of Understanding was signed concerning the treatment of names of geographical features shared by Canada and the United States (see E/CONF.85/L.54). As a result of the process established, any name changes or name proposals for transboundary features are considered by the names authorities of both countries. While local cultural and historical factors are respected, the general aim is for standardization of names of features across the international border. The principles and mechanisms set out in the Document continue to be followed by both countries.

- Resolution V/22 (Fifth Conference) refers to Aboriginal / Native geographical names. For both countries of the Division, work has continued to address collection and office treatment of such names. The United States has approved a policy for treatment (collecting, recording and application) of Native American names; this is available in published form. Canada has prepared a manual for the field collection of Aboriginal names, and two editions of an annotated bibliography concerning the toponymy of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples. Exchange of materials, ideas, and experiences has provided each names authority with useful comparisons to consider in developing its own approaches to recording, writing and formalizing such names.

- The development of geographical names digital data bases and, in the last couple of years, World Wide Web sites on the Internet, have been vital to both the United States and Canada in maintaining and distributing toponymic data. Both national names authorities now manage their digital systems with ORACLE RDBMS software and make their data available to the public, either through the WWW or through the purchase of digital files. The basics of data storage and dissemination continue to be exchanged between the names authorities. However, as the laws on intellectual property and copyright differ between the two countries, questions of sales and licensing are not addressed in common.

- Various approaches to the use of diacritics in names have been shared, as the USBGN reviewed its policy on this subject.

- At the state/provincial level, in addition to the national level, collaboration has been encouraged to resolve local issues, for example, questions relating to common features between Canadian provinces and US states.

- Canadian authorities continue to benefit from the expertise provided through the USBGN on practices for writing names of places and features in countries outside the United States / Canada Division.

- Staff of the USBGN have been very active in developing and offering toponymic training, through courses under the auspices of PAIGH, and through courses offered under the auspices of the United Nations. Canadians have also contributed to the work of UN toponymy courses, and in early 1997, staff of both countries worked together as part of a team providing toponymic training to the Baltic Division in Riga, Latvia.

In addition, the following contributions may be noted.

- The United States re-compiled the names and contact addresses of names authorities in the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

- The resolutions from the first six United Nations Conferences on the Standardization of Geographical Names have been compiled into a compendium of resolutions grouped by subject area. Both English- and French-language texts have been made available by Canada for the Seventh Conference, and it is planned to update the compendium as necessary following this Conference.

The United States and Canada continue to cooperate on toponymic issues on an ongoing basis. Exchange of documentation, concepts, and methodology encourages and enhances national toponymic standardization programmes.